

Testimonial Knowledge in African Indigenous Thought System

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Abstract

This paper examined testimony as a primary mode of knowledge transmission and justification, and a complex epistemic practice in African Indigenous Knowledge System (AIKS), where justificatory status is appropriated to elders' testimony. Using the tool of conceptual and comparative analyses, the paper examined how testimony is considered in mainstream epistemology vis-a-vis its portrait in African philosophy. It also employed a modest form of ethnolysis; a linguistic and cultural

analysis of key Yoruba epistemic expressions such as imò (knowledge), ìgbàgbó (belief), and gbo (hear), in order to ground the philosophical reflection in the lived language and categories of a people. The endeavour revealed that in testimonial exchange between the testifier and the receiver, the credibility of an elder's testimony is tested against his intellectual and moral qualities. This showed that epistemological activities in AIKS are not one directional affair, but one which involves the crucial place of the testifier and the receiver, and that testimonial knowledge in AIKS has some credible values such as; interconnectivity in knowledge and epistemic dependence. Thus, it is emphasized that testimonial knowledge in AIKS is a reliable and adequate model of socially embedded epistemological enterprise that balances the position of individual agents with communal epistemic traditions.

Keywords: African Indigenous Knowledge System (AIKS), Elders, Epistemology, Testimony, Oral Traditions.

1. Introduction

In epistemology, testimony is an umbrella term employed for knowledge acquired from others. This practice comes along with a range of arguments sounding the conditions under which testimony can be considered a source and justification of knowledge. The arguments raised with regards to these aspects of testimony in the mainstream epistemology are also considered against the African socially embedded epistemology that recognises testimony as a basic form of knowledge exchange in different oral forms. This epistemological inquiry is a fundament of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

African Indigenous Knowledge Systems refers to various means of acquiring knowledge about the world from the experiences, cultural heritage, and local knowledge of African peoples. In African Indigenous Knowledge Systems, knowledge is not considered an individual journey of discovery, but something that flourishes through shared experience. Testimonial knowledge generally plays a major role in African Indigenous Knowledge System (AIKS) as an epistemological tradition. Theories on testimonial knowledge

in African Indigenous Knowledge Systems identify a communitarian approach to knowledge with particular emphasis on oral traditions and dependence on elders. Africans believe that elders possess vast knowledge and moral integrity, and are thus considered as trustworthy testifiers and custodians of people's epistemic patrimony, which they preserved and transmitted in the different forms of oral traditions. This explains the reason why elders' testimony is an essential part of belief-formation mechanism in AIKS. This practice clearly shows that knowledge in AIKS is not merely an individual's cognitive endeavour, but the outcome of systematised social interactions. Aptly put, knowledge is a product of shared epistemic labour involving reliance on elders' wisdom and incorporation of individual's cognitive creativity, and testimonial knowledge is a typical example of the communitarian connotation of knowledge in African Indigenous Knowledge System.

2. Testimonial Knowledge

Testimony is a familiar concept in courtrooms and some religious gatherings. In the case of the former, an individual testifies to a crime he/she witnessed to the judge in determining the right direction of his/her judgement. While in the latter case, a (faith) believer recounts an experience supposedly of a miraculous nature alluded to divine mediation to a congregation. Nevertheless, in epistemology, testimony refers to the informative content of a speaker's assertion to a hearer. It is any statement or other communication that purports to state a fact or provide information.

In epistemology, testimony is regarded as a purposeful transmission of beliefs from one (the testifier) to the other (the receiver). It is an aspect of social epistemology and it gives credence to the possibility of deriving knowledge from the utterances of others. This practice is contrary to the popular approach to knowledge acquisition in mainstream epistemology where an epistemic agent is portrayed as an isolated individual capable of independent epistemic feats. An epistemic agent, in this sense, conducts his/her activities without reliance on others. This is typical of Rene Descartes' meditating self, postulated as capable of arriving at all truth about

himself and his world on absolute reliance on his reason. However, this purely individualistic or self-reliant approach to knowledge does not represent all possibilities of knowledge acquisition, because there are other philosophical traditions that recognise ‘epistemic feats’ that are regarded as outcomes of inputs from others. Testimony, the term employed to refer to this important source of knowledge in social epistemology emphasises the place of interactions of an epistemic agent with fellow humans and social institutions.

Conscious of the indispensability of attaining knowledge from various epistemic resources of others, epistemologists like Jonathan Golding, John Hardwig, and Miranda Fricker accord a place of significance to testimony in our epistemic endeavours latent in social relations. Elizabeth Fricker defines testimony as the spoken or written words of another on some matters.¹ Testimony is an umbrella term for knowledge acquired from others either in written or oral forms. Instances of testimony include all cases in which a person asserts something, and another person hears, reads, or otherwise witnesses the assertion.² Therefore, testimony is an issue of interest, as arguably, most of what we know is derived from others either in the oral or written form.³ In Yoruba moral epistemology, knowledge is a communal process grounded in relationships and trust. Hallen notes that testimony is central to this process, validated not just by facts but by the speaker’s moral integrity and social role. The concept of *iro* (truth) highlights that knowing is an ethical act, rooted in communal trust.⁴ Knowledge,

¹ Elizabeth Fricker, “Inference to the Best Explanation and the Receipt of Testimony: Testimonial Reductionism Vindicated,” in Kevin McCain and Ted Poston, eds. *Best Explanations: New Essays on Inference to the Best Explanation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.

² Francis Fabidun, “Testimonial Knowledge and the Epistemic Value of Yorùbá Proverbs,” *Ekpoma Review* 9 (2022): 95.

³ Barry Hallen, *A Short History of African Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 56.

⁴ Babalola Balogun and Aderonke Ajiboro, “Obscuring Our Sense of Morality: Barry Hallen’s Yoruba Moral Epistemology and the Problem of Character Indeterminacy,” *The Thinker* 99.2 (May 2024): 95-103.

therefore, is not merely cognitive but moral, uniting truth with goodness in the communal evaluation of the knower.

There are two traditional perspectives on justificatory status of testimony as a source of knowledge. These are: reductionism and anti-reductionism. Reductionism, as argued by David Hume, gives a probative value to testimony, and that any justification formed by testimonial belief can be reduced to the properties of other kinds or evidence of another source of justification, such as; sensory perception, memory, and inference.⁵ While witness/testifier's beliefs can be accepted on the basis of the reliability of the informant, the evidence itself does not provide a justification. What reductionism requires for a testifier's claim to yield knowledge consists in deriving justification from other sources. Anti-reductionism, as championed by Thomas Reid, on the other hand, considers testimony as a basic source of knowledge, along with other sources of justification like sense perception, memory, and inference. It holds that a speaker's evidence is sufficient to justify a hearer without further recourse to any non-testimonial evidence or source of justification.⁶ So, believing the interlocutor to be reliable is key for the recipient to be justified in believing in the testimony. Testimony is justified by default unless it is proven false or unreliable.

Mikhail Khort identifies an immediate challenge that confronts both views. He avers that non-reductionism is the relativistic consequence in instances of cognitive asymmetry such as; emotion, communicational ability, and spatial processing, between the informant and the recipient,⁷ while reductionism fails to take cognisance of normal social interactions where it is impossible to readily determine the reliability of the speaker.

⁵ David Hume, "On Miracles" in Michael Huemer, ed., *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings* (London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2002), 221 – 232.

⁶ Mikael Janvid, "Testimony in African Epistemology Revisited," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 40. 3 (July 2021): 281.

⁷ Mikhail G. Khort, "Trust to Testimony: Reductionism and Non-Reductionism," *Discourse* 8. 3 (June 2022): 18-28. <https://doi.org/10.32603/2412-8562-2022-8-3-18-28>, (Accessed April 03, 2025).

Florencia Rimoldi and Federico Penelas also identified interpersonalism and evidentialism as views on testimony.⁸ Interpersonalism holds that the epistemic value of testimony-based beliefs is due to some forms of interpersonal relationship during the testimonial exchange.⁹ Testimony can offer the hearer an interpersonal reason to believe the proposition conveyed by the speaker.¹⁰ The hearer's belief is justified because of the speaker's responsibility which counts as the reason to believe his testimony. While evidentialism is the view that the justified doxastic attitude to take toward a proposition is the attitude which "fits" or "is supported" by one's evidence. Evidence is all that matters for having epistemic justification to believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgment.¹¹ Testimony, in this view, must be explained in terms of the concept of "evidence" or on the basis of some evidential relation between a speaker's testimony that p and p . The reason for accepting someone's testimony is a justification for trusting his/her assessment of the evidence.

Epistemologists refer to knowledge acquired through testimony as testimonial knowledge. Leo Townsend defines testimonial knowledge as knowledge an addressee of testimony gets by believing the speaker in what he/she says, by taking it from him/her that p .¹² He further identifies the need for a targeted receiver or addressee who consciously receives the content of a testifier's testimony as knowledge, as necessary ingredient for testimonial knowledge.¹³

⁸ Florencia Rimoldi and Federico Penelas, "Testimony and Non-Evidential Reasons for Belief (A Non-Purist Place for Interpersonalism)," *Episteme* 20. 1-4 (2024): 1. doi:10.1017/epi.2023.55.

⁹ Richard Moran, "Getting Told and Being Believed," in Jennifer Lackey and Ernest Sosa, eds. *The Epistemology of Testimony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 272–306.

¹⁰ Rimoldi and Penelas, "Testimony and Non-Evidential Reasons for Belief," 2.

¹¹ Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 83-107.

¹² Leo Townsend, "The Epistemology of Collective Testimony," *Journal of Social Ontology* 6. 2 (2020): 187–210. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jso-2019-004>.

¹³ Townsend, "The Epistemology of Collective Testimony," 189.

To transfer or transmit knowledge through testimony, Jennifer Lackey opines that the speaker must know the right details of what he is transferring and there is a ready hearer who is acquiring the knowledge.¹⁴

Furthermore, for the hearer (recipient) to lay claim to testimonial knowledge, the testifier must, according to Tyler Burge, justifiably believe the truth of the proposition.¹⁵ A testifier's claim does not qualify as testimonial knowledge if the hearer does not believe. Furthermore, testimonial knowledge takes place when there is a synergy between the testifier's transmitted proposition and the proposition believed by the recipient. This is the claim of the Content Preservation Model. According to the Content Preservation Model "any testimonial knowledge acquired by the hearer must have the same content as the speaker's testimony."¹⁶ Testimonial knowledge transmits the content of the proposition of the speaker's testimony as knowledge to the hearer. Joey Pollock explains that "in a fruitful testimonial exchange, the speaker testifies to one precise content, *p*, and the hearer must form a testimonial belief with this very content, *p*."¹⁷ Successful testimonial knowledge is achieved when the content of the speaker's proposition generates knowledge in the hearer. Therefore, testimonial knowledge is not any knowledge that is acquired during a conversation between the hearer and the speaker. Instead, it is knowledge obtained "through" the speaker's testimony, for which he bears accountability.

The issues raised on testimony as a source of knowledge and justification transcends particular epistemic tradition due to the social nature of our cognitive activities. African social or cultural

¹⁴ Jennifer Lackey, "Testimonial Knowledge and Transmission," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 49. 197 (Oct. 1999): 483.

¹⁵ Tyler Burge, "Content Preservation," *Philosophical Review* 102. 4 (Oct. 1993): 486.

¹⁶ Joey Pollock, "Testimonial knowledge and Content Preservation," *Philosophical Studies* 180.10 (September 2023): 3074. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-023-02030-5>.

¹⁷ Pollock, "Testimonial knowledge and Content Preservation," 3074.

embedded epistemology recognises that a lot of our knowledge is acquired through testimony. It is basically in the form of exchange of information in oral forms in African traditional thought system.¹⁸

3. African Indigenous Knowledge System

The concept of African Indigenous Knowledge System is a variant of the indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is a general conception that is employed to cover the totality of initiatives developed over a long time by a particular group of people in answer to the challenges that confronted them in their local environment. Benson Akinawonu defines indigenous knowledge as a body of knowledge, ideas, practices that is unique to a given community or group having peculiarity in culture and tradition.¹⁹ Consequently, this designation refers to a complex system that accumulates in a people's indigenous attempt to respond to the problems and challenges encountered in their bid to understand and adapt to the peculiarity of their experience of reality. Cyril Emeka Ejike aptly captures indigenous knowledge as "the body of historically constituted knowledge that is essential for long-term adaptation of a community or human group to the biophysical environment."²⁰ The result of this adaption is evident in their socio-political, educational, economic, agricultural, medical, and religious outlooks. Hence, indigenous knowledge is the totality of a people's experience within their situated environment over a long period of time. It is knowledge that is acquired, treasured and transmitted over time from one generation to another in a bid to cope with challenges of life in such a social milieu.²¹

¹⁸ Janvid, "Testimony in African Epistemology Revisited," 287-288.

¹⁹ Benson Akinawonu, "The Philosophic Spirit in the Quest for African Sustainable Development and the Imperative of Indigenous Knowledge Forms," Presented at the 16th Inaugural Lecture of Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko, on 9th Feb., 2021, 10.

²⁰ Cyril Emeka Ejike, "African Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Philosophy," *Tansian University Journal of Arts, Management and Social Sciences (TUJAMSS)* 5 (2018): 29.

²¹ Akinawonu, "The Philosophic Spirit," 10.

Ejike depicts African Indigenous Knowledge System as “a lived world constituting Africans’ experiences, insights, and reasoning which embody their ways of knowing that enable them make their homes in a local style and for their continual existence and sustenance.”²² It is an epistemological insight into the African investigation, understanding, and adaptive strategies in responding to the challenges of meaningful living as Africans. It is also the expressions, practices, beliefs, understandings, insights, and ideas developed by local communities to aid their survival and flourishing overtime.²³ So, AIKS represents the various ways Africans understand reality and utilize their experience to attain meaningful existence, which in turn forms their worldview. African worldview constitutes the African experiential understanding of the world. This is what defines Africans for who they are, and it is what forms the object of their interrogation.

Africans interrogate reality holistically as a complex composition of an array of beings under the broad categories of supra-sensible and sensible realms. The former refers to the invisible or spiritual world which Africans view as the abode and realm of beings, such as: spirits, divinities, ancestral or clan deities and other forces. The latter is the visible world composed of physical objects like humans, animals, vegetation and other non-living objects perceptible to the senses. These two realms are considered as complementary in aiding the African comprehension of reality. Hence, Augustine Nwoye avers that the average African sees his/her world as being made up of two interdependent, interpenetrating and complementary planes: the visible and the invisible or the material and the spiritual planes.²⁴

Based on the interconnectedness of all things. Africans’ worldview does not separate humans from the natural and

²² Ejike, “African Indigenous Knowledge Systems,” 22.

²³ Prince Paa-Kwesi Hetu and Takako Mino, “(Dis)continuity of African Indigenous knowledge,” *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 19.1 (2023): 71.

²⁴ Augustine Nwoye, “An Africentric Theory of Human Personhood,” *Psychology in Society (PINS)* 54 (2017): 46.

supernatural world. This Africans' holistic perception of reality as a composition of metaphysical and physical entities is basic in the African approach to knowledge. For Africans, knowledge is communally shared. According to Nombulelo Shange, traditionally, African knowledge is often shared in the sense that the process of producing and sharing... knowledge is done as a collective and is built into the day-to-day practices rather than being crafted as a separate experience.²⁵ Knowledge focuses on daily and practical usage proffering solutions to practical issues of life in the community. Issues of life are attended to both at the community and individual levels.

Members of African communities participate, enhance and mutually enrich each other's epistemic experiences. In the Yoruba traditional system, for instance, it is believed that mutual epistemic dependency prevents erroneous or false judgement. This is evident in the proverb: "*Ogbon Ológbon ò je k'ápe àgbà ni wèrè*" (Other people's wisdom forbids that we refer to an elder as a lunatic). In the same way, the proverb "*Obi nnim a, obi kyere*" (If someone does not know, someone teaches) of the Akan people of Ghana shows the value of epistemic dependency. The proverb also underscores the epistemic virtue of humility and openness and willingness to be aided by others' knowledge. This is also seen in the Ghanaian proverb "*Nea onnim no sua a ohue*" (A child who asks questions does not remain ignorant). Perhaps, this is the Yoruba equivalent of "*a bere ona kii sina*". These show that knowledge acquisition and justification are issues of communal and interconnected systems, rather than solely individual efforts. This epistemic collaboration is expressed in the Zimbabwean proverb "*Abali babili na mano yabili*" (Where there are two people, there is double wisdom). The collective character of knowledge implies that Africans consider epistemic activities as mutual collaborations and directive devices.

²⁵ Nombulelo Shange, "African Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Not yet Uhuru," *University World News: African Edition*, 23 September 2021, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210922070428475>, (Accessed April 03, 2025).

Taking a leap from the proverb above, and in accordance with the African's portrayal of hierarchy of beings, there is the belief that old people are closer to the gods, and are considered elders as a link between the ancestors and the living. In this position, elders are believed to possess vast knowledge of nature and other aspects of the society. Elders are prided as custodians or keepers of their epistemic patrimony. Consequently, their insights on issues are usually considered as vital and taken seriously since such are an outcome of experience, wisdom, discernment, deep reflection and meditation. However, the Yoruba proverb "*omode gbon, agba gbon lafi da Ile-Ife*" reminds us that the foundation of knowledge and society depends on the combined wisdom of both the young and the old. While elders, by virtue of age and experience, transmit knowledge through oral traditions shaped by the community's interaction with the world, there exists a dynamic interplay between the youthful and the elderly wisdom that sustains cultural continuity.²⁶ Nevertheless, while elders often serve as custodians of knowledge, this view has been criticized for its potential authoritarian implications. The Yoruba proverb "*Omode gbon, agba gbon la fi de Ile-Ife*" (both the wisdom of the young and the old founded Ile-Ife) reminds us that knowledge is communal and intergenerational, not confined to age or authority. Therefore, African wisdom is not confined to textbooks or other print media, but thrives in the speeches of elders which are testimonials of their vast knowledge and enriched by the engagement of younger generations. The next section discusses in details testimonial knowledge in AIKS.

4. Testimonial Knowledge in African Indigenous Knowledge System

In African Indigenous Knowledge System, testimony plays a significant role, and it is regarded as a primary source of knowledge

²⁶ Francis Fabidun and Cyril-Mary Olatunji, "Epistemic Deference and African Indigenous Knowledge Production," *Regional Journal of Information and Knowledge Management* 6.2 (October 2021): 73.

and justification. One of the initial discourses on testimonial knowledge in an African knowledge system was by Hallen and Sodipo. Situating their analysis within Yoruba moral epistemology, they distinguish between knowledge (*imọ*) and belief (*ìgbàgbọ*). In their analysis, knowledge (*imọ*) refers to a first-hand piece of information acquired through any of the senses particularly conscious visual means. While belief (*ìgbàgbọ*) refers to a second-hand piece of information acquired through testimonies or reports from those who presumably had first-hand information of the event.²⁷

Hallen and Sodipo rank testimony lower than knowledge on the ground that the former can only yield belief (*ìgbàgbọ*) for the recipient. A piece of information is not knowledge until the subject has had first-hand experience of its claims. It is *Igbagbo* when the information is based on the knowledge of someone else. For testimony to yield knowledge, they posit that it must be subject to *verification by first-hand experience*. So, testimony is incapable of yielding justification, until when the recipient has determined the truth of the testifier's assertion.²⁸ It is also very important to ascertain that the testifier possesses a track record of moral probity, moral character (*ìwà*) such as honesty and reliability. Accordingly, Balogun and Ajiboro inferred that the verbal and non-verbal behaviours are important either as hard evidence or a motivation for accepting a person's testimony as true, and therefore, knowledge.²⁹

Balogun and Ajiboro denounce Hallen and Sodipo's postulation as an inaccurate presentation of Yoruba epistemology and *ipso facto*, testimonial knowledge, because the knowledge-belief distinction, which is foundational to this theory is theoretically faulty from the Yoruba linguistic point of view.³⁰ So, Hallen and Sodipo's

²⁷ Barry Hallen and J. Olubi Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 64.

²⁸ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, 78.

²⁹ Balogun and Ajiboro, "Obscuring Our Sense of Morality," 99.

³⁰ Balogun and Ajiboro, "Obscuring Our Sense of Morality," 100.

work on knowledge acquisition through testimony does not sufficiently reflect Yoruba epistemological approach and methodology. Testimonial knowledge in Yoruba parlance does not follow the postulated route suggested by Hallen and Sodipo. The idea of knowledge and belief is not a co-joined epistemological process such that the hearer needs to categorise what aspect qualifies as knowledge or as belief.

Another thesis on testimonial knowledge in AIKS is from African Communitarian Epistemology (ACE) espoused by Anselm Jimoh. This account bases its claim on the conception of knowledge as a product of relational activities among the various entities that constitute African reality, and identifies certain categories of people as custodians of knowledge. There are stringent standards to be met in order to qualify or be regarded as an elder of a custodian of knowledge in the community. It is a common belief among Africans that elders must be able to comprehend the complexity of interaction and the cohesion of things in the African world. They must possess experience about different aspects of life, and this is considered an advantage in their choices and decisions. Elders are considered as possessing a wealth of knowledge, experience, good judgment, and robust moral sensibility. Kosick posits that older people possess a wealth of knowledge and life experiences that are unique to their generation. He further enumerates that elders in general know: traditional skills and trades, historical events and personal stories, cultural traditions and customs, wisdom and life lessons and practical advice and problem-solving skills.³¹ This knowledge is passed down to younger generations and is accepted not just for its informational content but because it is rooted in long-standing relationships of trust and cultural authority. Pertinently, they should be able to bring their diverse experience over the years to bear in explaining and resolving complex issues within the community. Jimoh, therefore, argues that elders are reliable testifiers and sources

³¹ Lawrence Kosick, "Knowledge That Almost Only Older People Know," *Forbes*, 15 Feb. 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2024/02/15/knowledge-that-almost-only-older-people-know>. (Accessed April 06, 2025).

of justification for testimonial knowledge due to their sound epistemic and moral standing which are manifested in deeds, words, and ability to justify beliefs, values, and practices.³² The traditional reverence for elders in Yoruba epistemology rests on the presumption of moral integrity and experience. However, such authority cannot be taken as absolute; not all elders exemplify the epistemic and moral virtues required for reliability. Thus, testimony must still be evaluated through communal discernment and moral consistency.

Knowledge and morality are like two sides of a coin, and both are sacrosanct to the status of elderhood in African communities. Ikhuenobe posits that “moral and epistemological authority reside in the combination of age, experience, good judgement, character, and practical wisdom.”³³ Accordingly, elders are considered as custodians and repositories of knowledge, values, and traditions. Consequently, they are often viewed as being resistant to “teleological failure and deceptive intent”.³⁴ This resistance stems not from blind reverence, but from the elders’ cultivated intellectual and moral virtues. These virtues make them not only morally upright but also intellectually competent. Here, intellectual virtues such as wisdom, discernment, and reflective judgement position elders as rational repertoires of traditional heritage, capable of transmitting culturally grounded knowledge. Simultaneously, their moral virtues such as honesty, integrity, and communal commitment predispose them to ethical behaviour both in life and in epistemic exchanges. Together, these traits reinforce why elders are considered as credible testifiers and deferrable sources of justification for testimonial knowledge.

The idea of deferring to elders’ testimony also rests on the epistemic principle of dependency. Epistemic dependence is a social

³² Anselm Jimoh, “Reconstructing a Fractured Indigenous Knowledge System,” *Synthesis Philosophica* 33, no. 1 (2018): 18.

³³ Polycarp Ikuenobe, “Oral Tradition, Epistemic Dependence, and Knowledge in African Cultures,” *Synthesis Philosophica* 33, no. 1 (2018): 30.

³⁴ Jimoh, “Reconstructing,” 16.

mechanism and reliance on others in the process of knowing.³⁵ In the context of this section, it refers to individuals grounding their beliefs on the authority of the wisdom of elders as repositories of knowledge.³⁶ Epistemic dependence depicts an integrative approach in African holistic conception of knowledge that takes cognizance of different backgrounds, perspectives and experience of epistemic agents. Central in this epistemic endeavour is wealth of knowledge available in elders' testimony.

Pertinently, elders share stories and experiences about ancestral spirits, divination practices, traditional agricultural practices and medical remedies, stories of adaptation and responses to natural occurrences and survival techniques, strategies of successful wars and victories, development of traditional systems of government and preferred political system among others. Knowledge of these experiences form the contents of their worldview expressed in their intellectual patrimony, ethical teachings, and social practices. These are preserved as cultural values and ethical guidelines and transmitted in oral traditions through generations. So, elders' testimony forms an important part of belief-formation in AIKS. Knowledge is, therefore, a shared epistemic labour that involves reliance on elders' testimony, epistemic dialectics and incorporation of individual's cognitive creativity. Having established this, it is appropriate to consider the adequacy of this postulation as a portrait of knowledge in AIKS.

The preceding analysis reveals testimony as an indispensable epistemic practice that is central to the social connotation of knowledge in most African societies. African societies, as epistemic communities, always give social connotation to epistemological activities: for Africans knowledge is a social product and its justification is radically contextual. This arrangement, as scholars have argued, does not invalidate or discredit an individualistic

³⁵ Ezgi Sertler, "Epistemic Dependence and Oppression: A Telling Relationship," *Episteme* 19.3 (September 2022), 8 Mar. 2025. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2020.34>.

³⁶ Ikuenobe, "Oral Tradition," 34.

approach to knowledge, instead, it emphasises that epistemological activities have a higher credibility when routed socially. This indicates that testimonial knowledge in AIKS has always instantiated an epistemic practice that only became popular in mainstream epistemology in the 20th century. In testimonial knowledge, Africans uniquely portray knowledge acquisition as basically a social phenomenon. The social dimension of knowledge is further evident in words Africans employ as expressions or synonyms for knowledge. For instance, in Swahili the word *Ujuzi* is used for knowledge as well as wisdom and experience. *Maari* translates as knowledge, information and intelligence, and *elimu* is knowledge, education or learning.³⁷ These words are intelligent achievements that require more than an individual's ability to attain. This is aptly captured in an Akan and Ewe adage: *Nunya, adidoe, asi metunee o* (Wisdom is like a baobab tree; no one individual can embrace it). This means that like knowledge, an individual does not singly attain wisdom which is the product of social interaction and learning from others in the community.

The social nature of testimonial knowledge serves as a means of perpetuating African holistic perception of reality. As a primary means of transferring received and shared conception of reality in African societies, testimonial knowledge serves as a means of preserving knowledge across generations, provides a meeting point of appreciation and acceptance of their indigenous and cultural epistemic practices. It perpetuates the uniqueness of African epistemic heritage that recognises a sense of interdependence and responsibility. Testimony, therefore, fosters a sense of belonging and shared responsibility among community members to preserve the integrity of mutual dependency that characterises African conception of reality as embedded in their oral traditions.

Epistemic dependence buttresses the claim that arriving at justified true belief in testimonial knowledge involves certain form

³⁷ Kai Kresse, "Knowledge and Intellectual Practice in A Swahili Context: 'Wisdom' and The Social Dimensions of Knowledge," *Africa* 79.1 (2009): 148-167. doi:10.3366/E000197200800065X

of shared epistemic labour. Hallsson and Kappel argue that deliberative division of epistemic labour constitutes a distinct kind of epistemic dependence.³⁸ Shared epistemic labour refers to the contribution or active involvement of all epistemic agents in the attainment of knowledge. Testimonial knowledge focuses on the inclusiveness of the testifier and the receiver. Han Li *et al* observe that testimonial knowledge can be collaborative activities that require the speaker and the listener mutual epistemic responsibility for successful epistemic exchange. In these shared responsibilities, the speaker strives to provide coherent, sincere, and trustworthy information, while the listener is consciously committed to understand and accept the speaker's testimony.³⁹ In the context of AIKS, while elders provide credible testimonies, it is pertinent for the hearer to be receptive and docile, focusing on meeting the required conditions for the justification of the testimonial knowledge. This interpersonal or collaborative transactions between the speaker and listener in testimonial knowledge is a shared epistemic labour or responsibility.

Elders' testimony creates an opportunity for epistemic complementarity in the process of justifying knowledge. Epistemic complementarity is the recognition of the interdependence of diverse epistemic agents and ability to contribute to the attainment of epistemic feat. As an epistemological theory, complementarity emphasises the idea of an all-inclusive representation and acknowledgement that several viewpoints and distinct levels of explanation might be required for the understanding of a given phenomenon.⁴⁰ Given that epistemic solipsism is an illusion in AIKS,

³⁸ Bjorn G. Hallsson and Klemens Kappel, "Disagreement and the Division of Epistemic Labor," *Synthese* 197 (2020): 2823–2847. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-018-1788-6>.

³⁹ Pearl Han Li, et al, "The Collaborative Nature of Testimonial Learning," *Topics in Cognitive Science* 16 (2024): 241–256. doi: 10.1111/tops.12707.

⁴⁰ Fulvio Mazzocchi, "Complementarity in Biology: A Reassessment in Relation to Molecular-Reductionist and Systemic Approaches," *EMBO Reports* 11. 5 (April 2010): 343, doi:10.1038/embo.2010.56.

everyone is susceptible to benefitting from others' contributions on particular subject of interest. The practice of depending on elders' testimonies for knowledge and information of different aspects of the people's life indicates that the recipient is increasing his epistemological awareness. This can occur in different ways. For instance, listening to any form of oral traditions rendered in elders' testimony can either provide new awareness or insight into an aspect of African reality. Such verbal expression is also capable of providing more details or further clarification which previously were unknown to the receiver. This can also be considered conversely. Seeking clarification by a recipient of African oral tradition can widen the horizon of an elder to considering a modern approach or application to certain content of oral traditions. Therefore, elders' testimonial knowledge is an instance of epistemic complementarity in AIKS.

Regarding elders' testimony delivered in different forms of oral traditions as justified source of knowledge shows the systematised nature of Africans epistemological enterprise. In line with the general characteristic of knowledge as a deliberate action and not a random collection of fact, testimonial knowledge is an indication of Africans' careful organisation and development of their epistemological tradition over a long period of time. This epistemological tradition is developed and organised in the context of African cultural milieu that aid their apprehension of reality, improve upon it and preserve it for generations. That elders' testimony showcases Africans' systematic approach to knowledge is one reason for its relevance even in the face of contemporary approaches in knowledge enterprise and changing social values.

5. Conclusion

In the light of the foregoing discussion, testimonial knowledge occupies an important and irreplaceable position in African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS). The communitarian nature of AIKS, which is in contrast to the individualistic paradigm of traditional Western epistemology as typified by Cartesian foundationalism, emphasises mutual epistemic dependency,

continuity of culture and the normative authority of elders, provides an avenue for understanding knowledge acquisition and justification as socially situated and inter-generationally transmitted. Thus, testimony, in AIKS, is neither merely a supplementary source of knowledge nor a derivative justification. Rather, it is a foundational epistemic avenue through which the African conceptualises reality, knowledge and transmits traditional values.

This discourse reveals that testimonial knowledge in African thought is not a passive acceptance of second-hand information; rather, it is a product of dynamic social interactions and interplay of critical engagements and relations that do not undermine individual agency. Pertinent in this process is the principle of epistemic dependence that highlights the rational act of deferring to morally and intellectually virtuous elders who are revered for their wisdom and knowledge within the community. Elders manifest these traits in different forms of oral traditions. Oral traditions are regarded as important sources of knowledge and justification in AIKS. Therefore, the dynamics of testimonial knowledge in AIKS exemplifies African's unique approach to epistemological activities as socially-situated. The social character of knowing typifies Africans' general outlook to reality and its emphasis on interdependence of beings. The justification of knowledge in AIKS is therefore context-dependent. The seeming relativistic outlook of this approach is overridden by the shared principle of epistemic dependency which portrays knowledge as a product.

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